

# DOGS

## Past and Present

An Interdisciplinary Perspective



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## 3.9 Faithful unto Death. Burial, Legends and Heroism of the Dog from Antiquity to the Contemporary Age

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### Abstract

The dog has always played a special role in the relationship with humans. This work aims to assess the most significant findings of dogs associated with human burials in Antiquity from the Palaeolithic. Dog burials are well documented from the Neolithic and have continued until the contemporary age, providing evidence, along with the remains and sources in literature, frescoes and paintings, films and comics, the extent to which the link between this animal and humans is indissoluble. In modern times the cases of legendary dog loyalty remain very famous, like those of Achiko, Pal'ma, Bobby, and Lampo.

**Keywords:** Italy, Life/death, burial, sacrifice, legendary dog.

### 1 Introduction

The dog has always played a special role in the relationship with humans in terms of collaboration, trust, love, as well as friendship, even if humans can be ferocious and exploit the dog in various ways, sometimes with cruelty. The privileged relationship between human beings and dogs is archaeologically well attested in Antiquity from the Palaeolithic. Dog burials have continued until the contemporary age, demonstrating, along with the remains and sources in literature, frescoes and paintings, films and comics, the extent to which the link between this animal and humans is indissoluble. The aim of this work is mainly to investigate the most famous contemporary cases of legendary dog loyalty, like those of Achiko, Pal'ma, Bobby, and Lampo, just to name a few.

### 2 Archaeological findings

Some of the most famous dog remains were found at Bonn-Oberkassel more than a hundred years ago<sup>1</sup>. They

<sup>1</sup>This work aimed to assess all findings of dogs associated with human burials, through a detailed collection of data on dog remains, their position, completeness of the skeleton, description of the individual anatomical elements, number of individuals, age, sex, burning and butchery marks. We will try to highlight particularities and differences among the different contexts and periods. Several articles in this volume deal extensively with these issues, see Bona *et al.*, Latini *et al.*, Giardino and Zappatore, so we have preferred to cite these papers and make this article more publicly available in view of the emotive nature of the topic.

are dated to the Upper Pleistocene and are 14,223± 58 years old. Recent re-examination has revealed the remains of two dogs. The best preserved dog was 7 months old at death and was buried with two humans. It was perniciously ill because of a distemper when it was 19 weeks old. This allowed researchers to determine how the represented dog was perceived and treated by Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers. In fact, a dog with a serious case of distemper dies in less than three weeks if it doesn't receive adequate care (Janssens *et al.* 2018). Dog burials are known from many sites in several European countries, from Italy to Sweden and from Portugal to Russia (Grünberg 2013; Hasler and Noret 2017; Losey *et al.* 2018; Albizuri *et al.* 2019).

The oldest emergence of such similar behaviour seems to be demonstrated in another famous case: that of the puppy skeleton of a dog or a wolf found close to the human skeleton of a woman at Ain Mallaha in northern Israel (Davis and Valla 1978). The skeleton was dated to around 12,000 years ago. Instead, at Hayonim Terrace, a man was found interred with two small dogs, about 13,000 years ago, similar to other Natufian burials found in the Near East (Tchernov and Valla 1997). The dogs were probably killed, testifying that even in these cases, humans had carried out cruel activities.

In Italy, numerous cases of dog burials have been documented, dating from the Neolithic to Late Antiquity. In this paper, we will mention the most

important cases and those we have studied. Famous Neolithic dog burials are documented in Valdaro (near Mantua) where a dog was found in a burial called ‘the hunter’, placed on his owner’s feet, together with a set of arrowheads and blades (Castagna *et al.* 2014, Bona *et al.* this volume) and in Ripoli (Teramo), where it was buried together with a woman. In contrast, Chalcolithic dog burials are more frequent and located in central and southern Italy, such as the cases of Mirabella Eclano (Avellino), Tursi (Matera), Gaudio (Salerno), Casale del Dolce (Frosinone), Ponte S. Pietro (Viterbo), and Fontenoce (Ancona) (Onorato 1960; Cremonesi 1976; Miari 1993; Silvestrini *et al.* 1992/93; Bailo Modesti and Salerno 1998; Fiore and Tagliacozzo 2000; Wilkens 2000).

Two burials containing only dogs were found at Osteria del Curato-via Cinquefrondi (Rome). One of these was turned on its right side; the skeleton was still in anatomical connection with the limbs flexed and was devoid of the head. The other was turned on the left side and still in anatomical connection (Anzidei *et al.* 2007).

In the following centuries (Bronze and Iron age), dogs continued to be buried and among the numerous cases, we can mention the dog buried with a man at Cetona (Siena) and the adult dogs and puppies found in tomb 743 at Lavello (Potenza) or the puppy dog buried with a child at Pontecagnano-Colucci (Salerno) and the multiple burials of dogs and humans from Sant’Eufemia (Padua) (Guidi 1992; Cipolloni Sampò 1999; Facciolo *et al.* 2006; Negroni Catacchio and Aspesi 2016; Fiore 2016).

Among Etruscan communities, the dog was part of religion and myth to the point of being a status symbol, and for this reason, it is found in many princely tombs (Gambari and Tecchiati 2004). A significant discovery of dog burial is that of a dog buried together with an infant found in the necropolis of Amelia (Terni) and dated to the 4th-3rd century BC (Salari *et al.* 2014). The bronze bell-rattle lying in the grave together with the dog skeleton undoubtedly seals the emotional link between the animal and its owner, perhaps his playmate.

The dog takes on special significance in contexts where it is associated with newborns or aborted fetuses (Peltuinum-Aquila and Lugnano in Teverina), where this animal likely had magical or therapeutic value in addition to being a travelling companion; its sacrifice in other archaeological contexts (Kolonos Agoraios of Athens, Eretria, and Messenè) was considered as part of a purification ritual for the premature (Soren *et al.* 1995; Soren and Soren 1999; Fiore and Salvadei 2014; Migliorati *et al.* 2018; Liston *et al.* 2018; Sperduti *et al.* 2018).

The dog cemetery found at Ashkelon in Israel is particularly famous, where possibly thousands of dogs were interred from the 5th to the 3rd century BC (Edrey 2008). The majority of these dogs were puppies; they share many characters with the modern Canaan Dog, perhaps representing the ancestral population from which the modern breed descends. It is the largest known ancient dog cemetery known in the world. It is usually mentioned to refer to the reputed healing properties of dogs. Alternatively, it may have been the site of a facility for breeding dogs.

Dogs have continued to be buried in the historical period, both with the deceased and alone. In the case of dogs buried with humans, the meaning can reflect a sacrifice of the dog with the function of guardian to the burial of the master or even the extreme residence of the faithful companions of the deceased. In this case, the meaning can be read as an act of loving care to preserve the memory and affection of the dog, in the will to remember his loyalty to the owner (De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006).

Numerous dog burials, without any association with humans, were found in various necropolises of the Roman period located in the suburban area of Rome, such as in Fidene-via Radicofani and in Via Nomentana, at the junction with Via Palombarese) (De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2000, 2001). Tombs dedicated only to dogs are also well documented in ancient Greece (Trantalidou 2006).

### 3 Ancient sources

Several writers mention the loyalty of dogs to their masters (Minniti 2022: 174–186). Plutarch (*Them.* 10, 9–10) reports the sacrifice of the dog of Xanthippe, father of Pericles who could not bear the abandonment of his master due to the invasion of the Persians and followed him by sea to Salamina, where he died from the effects of the journey<sup>2</sup>.

Aelian tells of the affection of Polyarchos for his dogs (*VH* 8, 4) and tells of the funerals of the dogs of the philosopher Lakydès (*NA* 7, 41). Many qualities were recognised in the animal, defined in every age as the best friend of man. In this regard, Cicero (*nat. deor.* 2, 158) states: ‘And let’s not talk about dogs, their fidelity in guarding, and their affection for the master...’ What does all this mean except that the dog was created to meet the needs of man?’ (*Canum vero tam fida custodia*

<sup>2</sup> Ancient sources follow the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae (TLL - <https://www.thesaurus.badw.de/en/tll-digital/index/a.html#a>) the Liddell-Scott-Jones, A Greek-English Lexicon (LSJ - [http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/01-authors\\_and\\_works.html](http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/01-authors_and_works.html)). Cicero: *De natura deorum*; Aelian: *De natura animalium*; Lakydès: *De natura animalium*; Plato: *Republica*; Plutarch: *De amore proliis*; Plutarch: *vita di Temistocle*; Varro: *De re rustica*.



*tamque amans dominorum adulatio tantumque odium in externos et tam incredibilis ad investigandum sagacitas narium, tanta alacritas in venando quid significat aliud, nisi se ad hominum commoditates esse generatos).*

Elian (NA 7, 38), Quintus Smyrnaeus (16, 281), Plutarch (*moralia*, *De amore proliis* 2, 40), Lucretius (5, 862), and Varro (*res rusticae* 2, 9) all praise the memory of the dog, the only animal that recognises its name, as well as its loyalty and devotion to the master. Instead, the custom of honouring animals is clearly described in the life of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, who erected graves for his dogs and most loyal horses (HIST AVG., *Hadr.* 20). It is also well documented in some funeral inscriptions composed for companionship dogs.

Also in Greek literature, the courage and loyalty of dogs are praised. The episode of Ulysses when he had just arrived in Ithaca and was only recognised by his faithful dog Argo, has become proverbial. The specific ability of dogs to be simultaneously sweet and courageous was also remembered by Plato (R. 2, 374e–376c), who considered these animals to be a model for the guardians of his Ideal City. In Spartan society, hunting dogs were considered strictly private property, and anyone using them needed to receive the consent of their master.

#### 4 Modern and contemporary times

The custom of dog burial has been practised in recent times with different motivations. From the end of the 15th century, it was also linked to the trend for breeding and the creation of dogs that were perfectly responsive in appearance and character to the needs of man. This is clearly expressed in portraiture but also in epitaphs that highlight the loyalty to the master, even when he has died; including the themes of defence and custody of the grave; and of voluntary death of the animal that has lost its master.

Among the most famous historical examples are the canine burials of Francesco Gonzaga and Isabella d'Este (1474–1539)<sup>3</sup> and those of Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712–1786)<sup>4</sup> (Santi 1999). A faithful dog is often represented on the funerary monuments of famous people, and since the 19th century, the custom of burying dogs in special cemeteries began to spread, such as in Hyde Park in London<sup>5</sup>.

The loyalty of dogs is then largely testified by more recent events, including the cases of Bobbie, who

was the puppy of Edinburgh, the Border collie Tip, and many others about which many books have been written<sup>6</sup>. Among these is the well-known story of Hachiko, the Akita dog who, following the unexpected death of his master, Prof. Hidesaburo Ueno, waited for him every day for ten years (from 1925 to 1935) at Tokyo's Shibuya railway station<sup>7</sup>. The story has had a huge resonance both in Japan and abroad, so much so that it has recently been revived in two successful films, one set in Japan and the other in the United States, both starring the same actor.

Always linked to the 'railway' is the famous case of Lampo, the travelling dog. On a sunny August day in 1953, Lampo arrived by a freight train at the station of Campiglia Marittima (Livorno). It was immediately adopted by the deputy station master, Elvio Barlettani, who called him Lampo because of his speed. Lampo had been riding on trains for many years, but he always returned to the station to spend the night. In the morning, he used to accompany Virna, Barlettani's daughter, to her school in Piombino, then return to Campiglia station. One day, by mistake, the dog caused a train to stop, and the railway compartment ordered the dog to be removed. It was brought to southern Italy and abandoned in the countryside, but after five months, the dog, sick and malnourished, reappeared in Campiglia. His fame grew suddenly; it got the attention of the national and international press and the dog was finally adopted officially by the Italian Railways. It will also be filmed by several television crews. Lampo died in 1961, killed by a manoeuvring train that was late. A statue was erected in his honour at the station of Campiglia Marittima (Barlettani 2014).

Another case is that of Pal'ma, a female German shepherd that was abandoned by its master in 1974 at the airport of Vnukov, even if it is not very famous in the West. At the time of boarding, the Iljušin-18 flight crew refused to accept the dog because it lacked a veterinary certificate. Its master left anyway, leaving the animal alone. From that day on, the dog stayed at the airport and ran to meet all the Il-18 in the hope of seeing its master again, who never returned. In 1976, a paper written by the reporter Jurij Michailovich Rost spread the story of Pal'ma throughout the Soviet Union<sup>8</sup>. Hundreds of touched readers wrote messages or sent rubles to feed Pal'ma. Fortunately, Vera Arseniivna Kotljarevskaja, an activist from the Society for the Protection of Animals and professor of biology at the Faculty of Education in Kiev, arrived at the airport and decided to stay a week on the spot to

<sup>3</sup> Viewed 10 May 2020, <https://www.mantovaduale.beniculturali.it/it/news/519-i-cani-dei-gonzaga-da-rubino-a-tibris>

<sup>4</sup> Viewed 10 May 2020, <https://learnandreturn.wordpress.com/2011/05/25/old-fritz-and-his-dogs/>

<sup>5</sup> Viewed 10 May 2020, <https://funlondontours.com/the-victorian-pet-cemetery-of-hyde-park/>

<sup>6</sup> Viewed 10 May 2021, <https://www.farmersjournal.ie/greyfriars-bobby-the-most-faithful-dog-585174>

<sup>7</sup> Viewed 30 December 2021, <https://allthatsinteresting.com/hachiko-dog>; <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hachiko%5C8D>

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Dog\\_Named\\_Palma](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Dog_Named_Palma)



Figure 1. Bernardo Gengarelli and Tommy  
(Photo by D. Riparbelli).

gain the dog's trust. She was able to put a collar on it, sedate her and bring her to her home in Ukraine. Later, Pal'ma had three puppies and lived with Vera until the dog's death.

### 5 Story of Tommy

Finally, we wish to describe the unpublished story of Tommy (Figure 1). It was the dog of another railwayman, Bernardo Gengarelli, who worked at the station of Pescara (Abruzzi). As told to Jacopo De Grossi Mazzorin<sup>9</sup> by his nephew Davide Riparbelli, Bernardo, after life-changing events linked to the Second World War, managed to return to Pescara with his family at the end of hostilities. His newfound peace did not last long, because his wife Elvira passed away due to a lymphoma. Bernardo was so overwhelmed with his loss; he moved house. Although the man was inconsolable, he could always count on his dog, Tommy's affection. Every day for five years, Bernardo went to the cemetery of San Silvestro on his Lambretta scooter, to kneel at Elvira's grave. On the 16th of May 1956, at the exit of the cemetery, he was struck by a car. Tommy did not resign himself to the death of his master. Every morning he walked to the cemetery to lie down on the graves of Bernardo and Elvira, and remained there till the evening. After a few months, however, he was also killed by a car on the way back.

<sup>9</sup>Jacopo De Grossi Mazzorin

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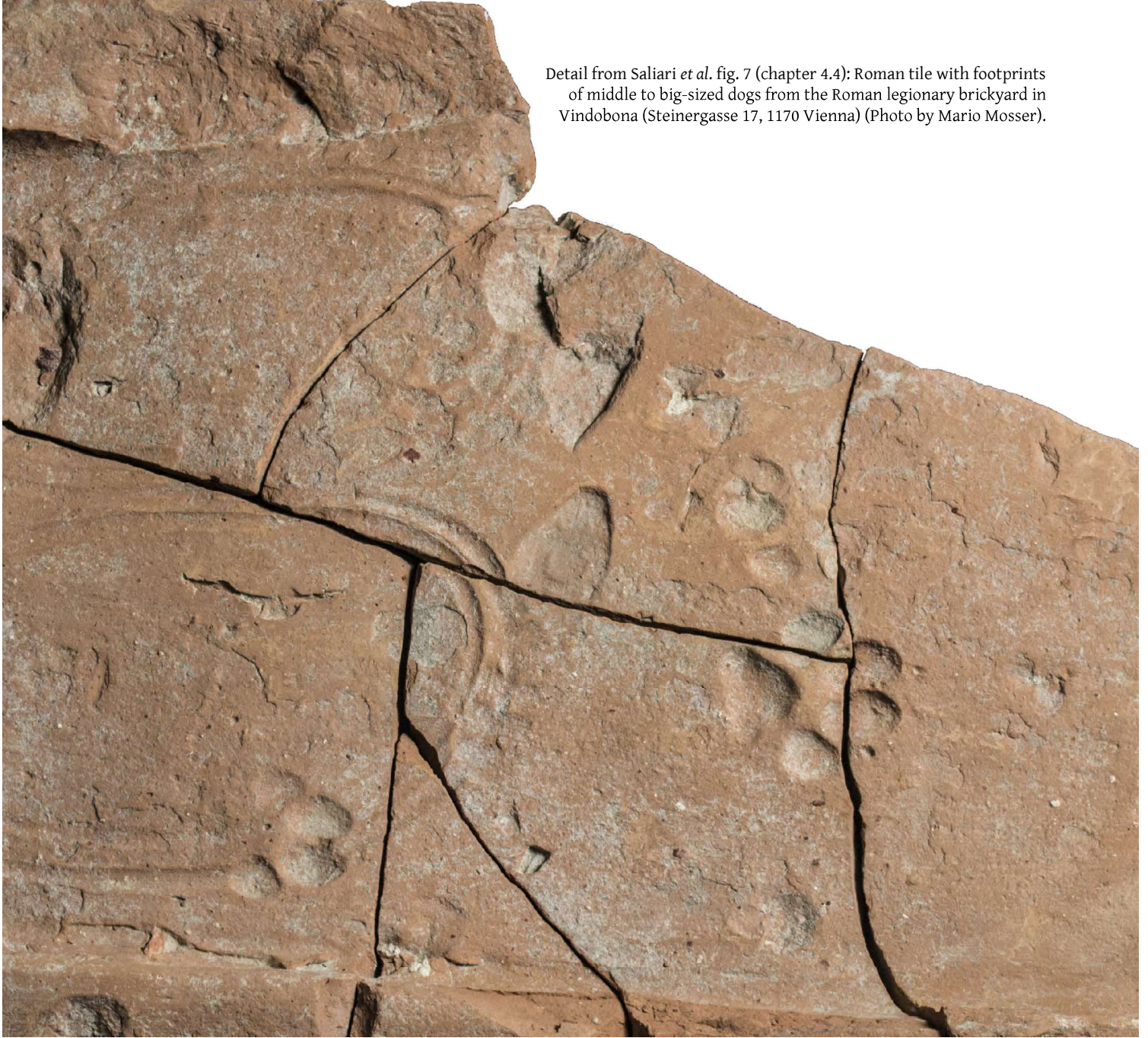
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Detail from Saliari *et al.* fig. 7 (chapter 4.4): Roman tile with footprints of middle to big-sized dogs from the Roman legionary brickyard in Vindobona (Steinergasse 17, 1170 Vienna) (Photo by Mario Mosser).



## **Section 4**

### **Dogs: Archaeological and Archaeozoological Cases**